

# A Semantic Study of Idioms in Mark Twain's Novel *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*

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## Abstract

This paper highlights the meaning of idioms in the novel "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer", which is written by the famous American Author 'Mark Twain'. As observed by the researchers, the novel is full of idiomatic expressions. The paper identifies the idioms, types, functions and features. The model is presented for the analysis of data, called the 'semantic analysis of idioms' which is taken from Fernando (1994) and Nunberg, Sag, and Wasow (1994) classifications. According to the model, the samples of data will be analyzed according to pure, semi, and literal idiom. Second, they will be analyzed according ideational, interpersonal, and relational function. Additionally, compositionality, conventionality, and transparency are the last part of the model. The analysis used a mixed method that comprises both qualitative and quantitative analyses. The results revealed that semi and pure idioms are the most used types in the novel. While the most used functions are ideational and interpersonal. At the end, conventionality and transparency idioms are the dominant elements.

**Key words:** idioms, functions, types, semantic analysis.

## دراسة دلالية للتعبير الاصطلاحي في رواية مارك توين "مغامرات توم سوير"

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## المستخلص:

تسلط هذه الورقة البحثية الضوء على معنى التعبيرات الاصطلاحية في رواية "مغامرات توم سوير" للكاتب الأمريكي المعروف مارك توين. لاحظ الباحثان ان الرواية مليئة باستخدام التعبيرات الاصطلاحية. تعرف الورقة البحثية التعبيرات الاصطلاحية، أنواعها، وظائفها وخصائصها. وقد صمم الباحثان نموذجاً لتحليل البيانات أسمياها "التحليل الدلالي للتعبيرات الاصطلاحية" وهو مأخوذ عن تصنيفات فيرناندو (1994) ونمبورك وساكن وواسو (1994). وبالاعتماد على النموذج، فان تحليل العينات تم أولاً طبقاً للأنواع وهي: التعبيرات الخالصة، شبه تعابير، والتعبيرات الحرفية وثانياً بالاعتماد على الوظائف وهي الادراكية والتفاعلية والعلائقية. ركز الجزء الأخير من التحليل على تقسيم التعبيرات الاصطلاحية الى التركيبية والاعتيادية والدلالية. استخدم الباحثان طريقتي التحليل الكمي والنوعي. وقد أظهرت النتائج ان التعبيرات الخالصة او النقية وشبه التعبيرات من أكثر الأنواع استخداماً في الرواية. في حين ان الوظائف الادراكية والتفاعلية هي الأكثر استخداماً كما وجد ان التعبيرات الاعتيادية والدلالية هي أكثر التعبيرات المسيطرة بالرواية.

الكلمات الدالة: التعبيرات، الوظائف، الأنواع، التحليل الدلالي

## 1. Introduction

An idiom is an expression whose meaning can't be deductible by its individual words. Although all languages have idioms, it is somehow difficult to understand them from one particular language to another unless people understand the figurative meaning plus the culture of the target language. Moreover, idioms enhance the language, and they make language more powerful. They are informal, but using idioms also enforces conversation and makes it sound more fluent, and they may provide a new way for expressing thoughts or feelings. In addition, they have a huge impact in teaching a second language as it may be a source for students to improve their communication skills in the target language, and expand their vocabulary. The English language is rich in idioms; speaking and writing would be less humorous and varied without them. In literature, authors use idioms in their literary works to express their imagination, and they are used to create images and convey meaning by adding texture and color to the literary text.

Moreover, this paper focuses on the semantic side of idioms in the novel "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer". Because of the complexity of idioms meaning and the importance of using them, the researchers felt that it is necessary to shed light on them. Therefore, this study will deepen the understanding of idioms from semantic side.

Furthermore, the paper consists of two parts: the first part is theoretical, which concentrates on the definitions, types, functions and classifications of idioms. The second part is the practical one, which involves the eclectic model of analysis, data selection, a description, methodology, analysis and results.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Definitions of Idioms

Baker [1, p.63] defines idioms as fixed phrases that accept little change or no change in form at all. It carries meanings which cannot be concluded from their individual constituents. Thus, idioms have non-literal meanings.

As to Wright [2,p.7], an idiom is a phrase which is fix, and it is recognizable between native speakers. An idiom is derived from the word "idioma" which comes from Latin, and it means "special property".

An idiomatic expression is a special expression of a language, and it cannot be analyzed easily from its grammatical structures or from the literal meaning of individual words [3, p. 627]. According to that, there are no rules of grammar in idioms. They are like habitual actions of language used by native speakers. It is a little bit difficult for foreign learners to understand idioms.

Curry [4,p.49] states that "an idiom is assigning a new meaning to a group of words which already have their own meaning".

Traditionally, idioms are components or a set of components whose meaning is not compositional and cannot be interpreted from their individual parts [5, p.327].

Johnson-Laird [6,p.ix-x] describes idioms as "the poetry of daily discourse". They are considered as a tool for daily communication with others. They are significant as they enrich the language, and sometimes speakers cannot write or speak without using idioms.

### 2.2 Types of idioms

Fernando [7,p.35] classifies idioms into three types: "pure, semi-idioms and literal idioms".

- 1- She defines pure idioms as a kind of standardized expression, a figurative multiword expression. They are fixed phrases. This type of idiom is generally not literal, although they may have a variation or no variation at all [7,p.36].

Ex1: "spill the beans" [7,p. 32]. It means 'to reveal a secret', and it has nothing to do with beans.

Ex2: “kick the bucket” [7]. Meaning ‘to die’

The previous examples illustrate that there is no relation between the meaning of individual words and the overall meaning.

2. Semi-idioms: also called “partial idioms” this type involves two parts, which are partially difficult or unclear, because one part has one or more literal meanings and another part is non-literal [7, p.60].

Ex3: “foot the bill” [7]. foot here is a figurative, not literal, which means “to pay”

Ex4: “A dark horse” [7]. “A dark” takes a figurative meaning, which means “a successful, hardworking man”.

3. Literal idioms: these types of expressions have a simple structure; they are easy to understand, and their meaning is clear. Thus, they are not complicated.

Ex5: “of course, in any case, for certain, on the contrary” [7].

According to Fernando [7,p.27-214], idioms can also be classified by their function into: “ideational, interpersonal and relational”.

1. The ideational function of idioms refers to the contents that consist of actions. They express experience, idea, or concept about the world. They carry meanings of life, situation, feeling, or action. As in Ex1, “kick the bucket”, it’s something occurs in the real world.
2. The Interpersonal function of idioms represents relationships and attitudes between individuals. It is “interactional function”, and how emotions, politeness, social communications, and humor are reflected by language, especially idioms.  
Ex6: “My bad”, “I beg your pardon” demonstrates apologies.  
Ex7: “Good morning”, “long time no see” express greetings.
3. The last function is the relational function of idioms. This function is employed to maintain coherence and cohesion. As in sequences “first, second”.

Additionally, idioms can be classified semantically according to Nunberg, Wasow, and Sag [8, p. 498]. They proposed a model for analyzing idioms semantically. However, this model states that idioms are not just fixed phrases or non-compositional. They assumed that most idioms are compositional, which means that they can contribute to the general meaning in a systematic manner. Moreover, they suggest that idioms have semantic components. Semantic component concentrates on the “literal and figurative meaning of idioms”.

According to them, there are three features of idioms: “compositionality, conventionality, and transparency”. First class allows lexical grammatical variations, and their components play a role in the general meaning of the sentence. The second class cannot be understood easily. There is no predictability of meaning based on knowledge, but it can be learned by usage. The last type is transparency, which means the figurative meaning of idioms [8].

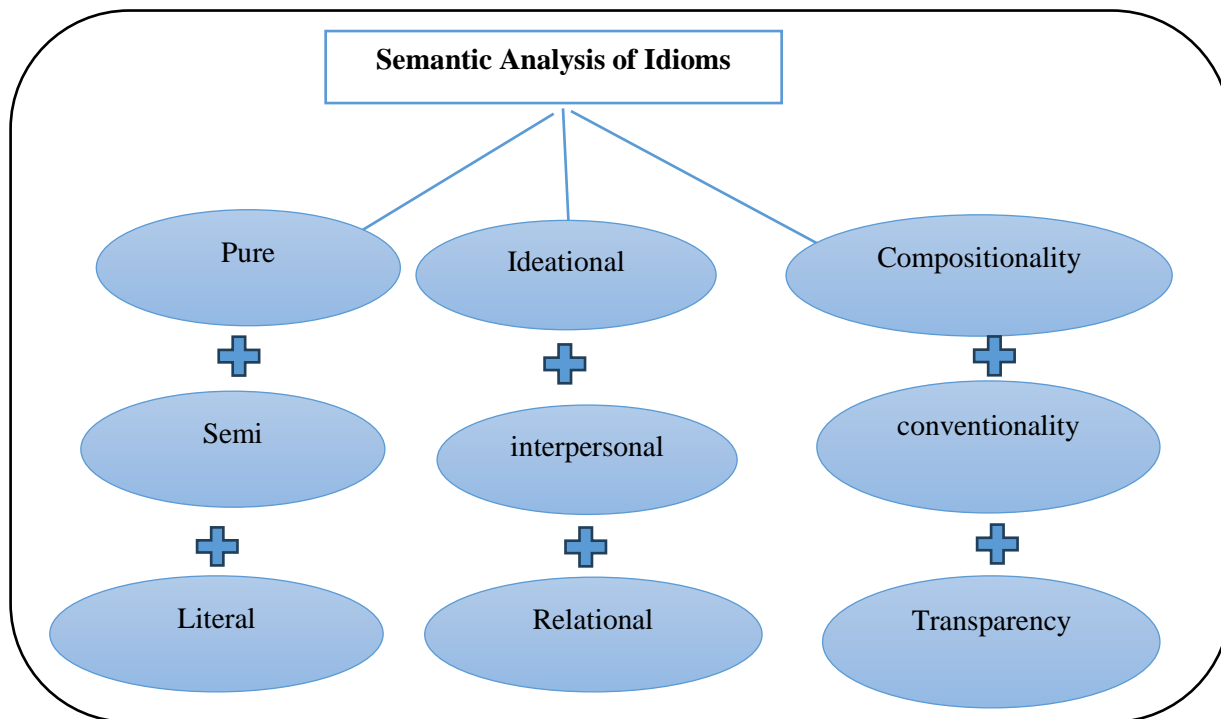
### 3. Research Questions

How many idioms are there in the novel? What kind of idioms are they?

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 The Model of Analysis

The researchers depend on Fernando [7] and Nunberg, Sag, and Wasow [8] classifications as a model for analyzing the data. The following figure shows the model of analysis:



#### 4.2 Data Selection and Description

The researchers chose the novel “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer” by Mark Twain as a data for this study for the probability of finding many idioms because the novel is rich with slang, dialectical language, and may also involve idioms, and it is an artistic representation of the American language. The novel was published for the first time in 1876. The story is about a boy named ‘Tom’. He lived along the Mississippi River in the town called “St. Petersburg”. The story is constructed on the author’s personal experience. The novel reveals social, economic, and cultural aspects of 19<sup>th</sup> - century American Society. Moreover, it is divided into thirty-five chapters, and the main characters of the novel are: “Tom Sawyer, Aunt Polly, Huckleberry Finn, Becky Thatcher, Sid, Muff Potter, injun Joe, Mary, Dr. Robinson, Mr. Jones, Mr. Sprague, Judge Thatcher, Jim...” (web source 3).

#### 4.3 Method of Analysis

The researchers will analyze the data by relying on the model presented previously (see Figure 1). The researchers use mixed methods, “qualitative and quantitative” for analyzing the data. In social studies or fields, mixed methods are generally accepted as a modern methodology [10,p.203 and 11,p.42-45]. They will analyze a sample of the novel. The examples are taken for the analysis are based on situations, and the following situations are selected randomly, and they will be in italics. Microsoft Excel software is utilized for calculating the results.

### 5. Illustrative Examples:

1. *“Forty times I’ve said if you don’t let that jam alone, I’d skin you”*(ch1,p.4).

this quote is said by Tom's aunt. It refers to punishment "I will punish you several times". It can be assumed that the idiom is pure because "skin you" has figurative sense referring to punishment which is not literal "removing your skin". Its interpersonal which shows attitude, and it is conventional.

2. "*He's full of the old scratch, but laws-a-me*" (ch.1, p.5).  
It is said by Polly when she was talking about Tom. "Old Scratch" is an idiom related to a demon. It appeared in old European societies, and it mentioned in many stories and folklore in British and America. It was usually used in literature and superstitious. "Law-a-me!" is a dialectal idiom referring to surprise it like (oh my Gosh!). "Old Scratch" is a pure idiom not literal, ideational function and conventional. "Laws-a-me" can be consider it as pure idiom and its interpersonal function and conventional.
3. "*Can't learn an old dog new tricks*"(ch1. P.4)  
It is said by Sid to his aunt when they were talking about Tom's bad behavior. This idiomatic expression is generally used to refer to the hardness and difficulty to change someone's bad behavior. That idiomatic expression is pure as it is non-literal, and it does not refer to dogs or tricks. It has ideational function which indicates conceptual thing in the real world. Moreover, the expression is certainly conventional because most native speakers recognize it and store it in their memory chunk.
4. "*Tom knows where the wind lay*" (ibid).  
This situation is said by the narrator discussing Tom's understanding of his aunt hidden purpose. The phrase does not mean exactly wind, but it means Tom has an awareness of situations and how they are going. Moreover, it is pure, conventional idiom and has ideational function.
5. "*I'd made sure you'd played hooky and been a-swimming. But I forgive you Tom*" (ch.1, P.7).  
This quote is said by Tom's half-brother 'Sid'. it is an idiom means mis school or work to do something fun. The type of "played hooky" is pure idiom, conventional and has ideational function.
6. "*Siddy, I'll lick you for that*" (ibid).  
It is said by Tom. It is a threat. It refers to punching someone causing him to feel psychical pain. In other words, it points out to beat or to hit. In addition, this idiom repeated many times in the novel. The idiom is partially figurative and connected to the literally sense. It is conventional as it is not expectable, and it is ideational because it expresses an action.
7. "*Not because his troubles were one whit less heavy...*" (ibid)  
This sentence is said by the narrator. The underline idiomatic phrase refers to "not at all, or not in the slightest degree". *Whit* by itself means tiny amount of something. Semantically, it is semi-idiom since the figurative meaning linked with literal one. "Not one whit" is ideational as it shows degree. According to Nunberg et. al. (1994) classification, the expression is transparent.
8. "*You can lump that hat if you don't like it. I dare you to knock it off and anybody that'll take a dare will suck eggs*" (ch.1, p. 9-10).

This speech said by Tom to unnamed character. “*Lump it*” is an idiom means doing or accepting something unpleasantly or undesirably because other options are not available. “Knock it off” means to stop doing something unsuitable or irritating. Moreover, “suck eggs” is another idiomatic expression used in the speech. According to the speech Tom is trying to insult the boy and mock him by saying “only a foolish person will take the dare”. The three idiomatic expressions can be analysis semantically as: “lump that hat” semi-idiom, ideational since it describes an activity of putting the hat, it is transparent. The second expression “knock it off, “is semi-idiom, interpersonal shows speaker’s attitudes and it is also transparent. The third “suck eggs”, is pure as the figurative meaning has nothing to do with literal meaning and there is no link between them and it is interpersonal and conventional idiom.

9. “you’re a coward and a pup” (ch.1, p.11).

This speech said by Tom to the unnamed boy. He is quarreling with boy, and he is telling him “You’re weak and you don’t have the qualities or the experience and childish. Therefore, the phrase implies an insult. Additionally, the word “pup” is used here as a metaphor. The expression is figurative and it relies on a literal meaning so it is semi-idiom, interpersonal based on describing a feeling and social opinions and it is transparent since the meaning can be concluded from the literal words.

10. “Holler nuff” (ibid).

It is said by the boy when he was fighting with Tom. The phrase means “it is enough” or crying for mercy. This phrase is not normally used in informal language. Furthermore, the phrase is semi-idiom, ideational shows an act of surrendering and its transparent.

11. “*White, mulatto, and negro boys and girls were always there waiting their turns, resting, trading playthings, squirrelling, fighting, skylarking*” (ch.2, p.13-14).

This situation is said by the narrator describing the events. “*skylarking*” is an idiom which refers to carelessness and playing around without paying attention to any productive activity or achieving something. moreover, the semantic analysis of the expression is pure idiom since the word has nothing to do with larking or sky. Its ideational and conventional.

12. “*White ally, Jim! And it’s a bully taw*” (ch.2 P. 14).

This quote said by Tom to Jim. The underline idiom means remarkable toy, and it is a kind of shooting game or toy. That idiomatic phrase back to nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and it common between children who were playing marble. However, the expression is figurative and literal in meaning therefore, it is semi-idiom. According to Fernando (1994) categories, it is interpersonal along with that, it is conventional not compositional or transparency.

13. “*Ben’s gait was the hop-skip-and jump— proof enough that his heart was light and his anticipation high*” (ch.2, P.15).

The extract above is said by the narrator voice about a boy named Ben Roger. The idiom “*hop-skip-and jump*” means a short distance that can be completed quickly. It can be analysis as semi-idiom, ideational for the reason that it gives information in the real world and it’s transparent as it can be understood easily.

14. “*Hi-Yi! YOU’RE up a stump, ain’t you!*” (ch.2, P.16).  
This speech is said by Ben to Tom. “*Up a stump*” is a common American idiomatic expression, and it means stuck in a problem or trapped in a difficult situation. It is semi-idiom as there is a connection between the figurative image and the literal meaning. Besides, it refers to a state or condition of being stuck so it has ideational function. Semantically, it is also conventional.
15. “*That put the thing in anew light*” (ch.2, P.17).  
This idiomatic expression is said by the narrator, and it is a common idiom that means to change a point of view of someone about something. The phrase is definitely semi-idiom because it’s figurative and connected to the literal meaning. In addition, it conveys an action therefore, it is ideational. There is no difficulty in the inferring the meaning of the expression, therefore, it is transparent.
16. “*Ben, I’d like to, honest injun; but aunt Polly-well, Jim wanted to do it, but she wouldn’t let him; Sid wanted to do it, and she wouldn’t let Sid*” (ch. P.18).  
The quote above is said by Tom to Ben, and the underlined idiom is historical one. It back to ninetieth century, and it implied truth. It is like saying “I’m telling the truth or I swear”. it’s semi-idiom as honest means figuratively ‘truly’ which derives from a good honest person. The idiom also interpersonal and conventional it describes someone emotion and it is not transparent.
17. “*Then the howl of a far-off dog rose on the night air, and was a swered by a fainter howl from a remoter distance*” (ch.9, 79).  
This extract is said by the narrator describing the situation. The idiom “a far-off dog” it means something faint or distant to exact situation. However, it is semi-idiom, ideational as it signifying people experience about universe, and it has the elements of transparency.
18. “*Then Tom grided up his loins, so to speak, and went to work to get his verses*” (ch.4, p. 29).  
This quote is mentioned by the narrator when he was describing the situation. The underline phrase means getting ready mentally and physically for a difficult work. The phrase belongs to biblical language and it is an old expression. Semantically, it is semi-idiom, ideational and conventional.
19. “*And Sid made a mental note of the omission*” (Ch.3, p.28).  
This speech is said by the narrator about Sid. the figurative meaning of the expression is to remember something therefore, it is semi-idiom as some of the words are already literal, and it is ideational, and it can be said that it is conventional.
20. “*Tom dodged hither and thither through lanes until he was well out of the track of returning scholars...*” (Ch.8, p. 72).  
The quotation is said by the narrator about Tom. To analysis it semantically, it will be as literal idiom since the literary meaning suggest the whole meaning it means “moving quickly here and there”. It is ideational as it indicates action and movements, and it is also could be both compositional and transparent depending on the listener or reader.

21. “*Spare the rod and spoil the child as the good book says*” (ch.1, p.5).  
The previous speech is said by aunt Polly about Tom’s behavior. The expression refers to discipline and children should not be spoiled. It can be said that the meaning is somehow not easy to understand; the expression is a pure idiom, ideational because it implies a belief or idea, and it indicates conventional sense.
22. “*The villagers had a strong desire to tar-and-feather injun Joe and ride him on tail for...*”  
The above speech was narrated by the author about the situation. The underlined expression means a desire for punishing and humiliating somebody publicly. The phrase is semi-idiom, interpersonal and conventional.

## 6. Results and Discussions

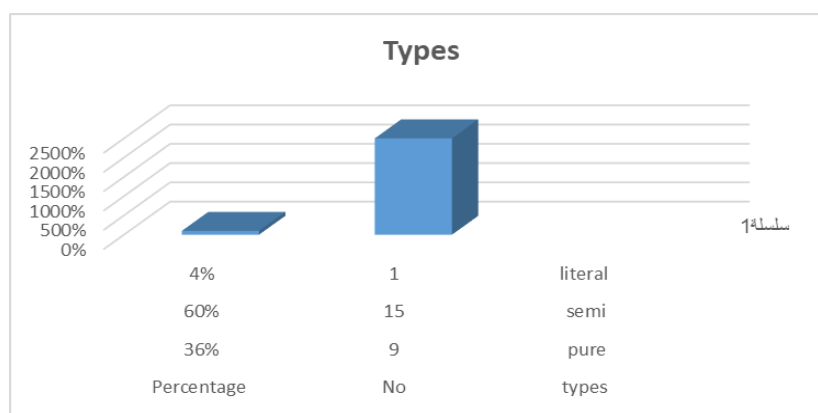
Table (1) Summary of the analysis

No.	Idiom	Meaning	Type	Function	Nunberg et. Al classification
1	Skin you	Punishment	Pure	Interpersonal	Conventional
2	Old scratch	Demon, evil	Pure	Ideational	Conventional
3	Laws a me	Surprise	Pure idiom	Interpersonal	Conventional
4	An old dog new tricks	Hardness to Change someone behavior	Pure	Ideational	Conventional
5	where the wind lay	Awareness of the situations	Pure	Ideational	Conventional
6	Played hooky	Be absent from school	Pure	Ideational	Conventional
7	lick you	Threatening someone or punishing	Semi-idiom	Ideational	Conventional
8	Not one whit	Not at all	Semi- idiom	Ideational	Transparent
9	Lump that hat	Accepting something unpleasantly	Semi-idiom	Ideational	Transparent
10	Kick it of	Stopping doing something	Semi-idiom	Interpersonal	Transparent
11	Suck eggs	Insulting someone	Pure	Interpersonal	Conventional
12	you’re a coward and a pup	Insulting	Semi-idiom	Interpersonal	Transparent
13	Holler nuff	Enough	Semi-idiom	Ideational	Transparent
14	hop-skip-and jump	Short distance	Semi-idiom	Ideational	Transparent
15	up a stump	Trapped in a difficult situation	Semi-idiom	Ideational	Conventional
16	put the thing in anew light	Change someone perspective	Semi-idiom	Ideational	Transparent
17	honest injun	Telling the truth	Semi-idiom	Interpersonal	Conventional
18	a far-off dog	Faint, distance	Semi-idiom	Ideational	Transparent
19	Grided up his loins	Preparing for a task	Semi-idiom	Ideational	
20	Made a mental note	Act of	Semi-idiom	Ideational	Conventional

		remembering something			
21	dodged hither and thither	Moving fast and quickly in different directions	Literal idiom	Ideational	Compositional + Transparent
22	spare the rod and spoil the child	Discipline	Pure idiom	Ideational	Conventional
23	Skylarking	Carelessness	Pure idiom	Ideational	Conventional
24	it's a bully taw	A type of game	Semi-idiom	Interpersonal	Conventional
25	tar-and-feather	Humiliating and punishing	Semi-idiom	Interpersonal	Conventional

**Table (2) Frequency and Percentage of Types of idioms in the Novel**

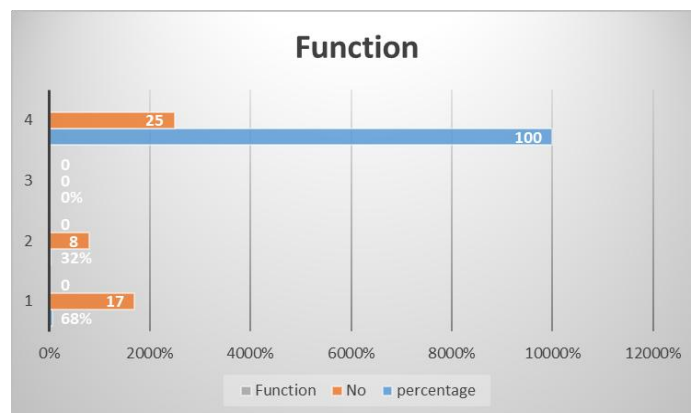
Types	No.	Percentage
Pure idioms	9	36%
Semi-idioms	15	60%
Literal idioms	1	4%
Total	25	100%

**Figure (2) A histographic Representation of Types of idioms in the Novel**

As illustrated in the above Table and figure, semi- idioms are the most utilized type in the novel, as it appears (15; 60%), and pure idioms come after (9; 36%), and Literal idioms are less used.

**Table (3) Frequency and Percentage of Function in the Novel**

Function	No.	Percentage
Ideational	17	68%
Interpersonal	8	32%
Relational	0	0%
Total	25	100%

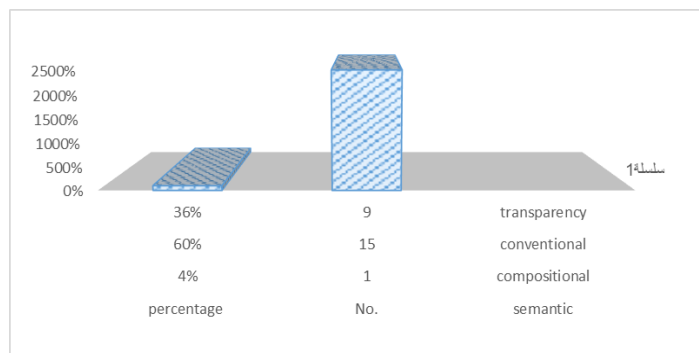


**Figure (3) A histogrammic Representation of Functions of idioms in the Novel**

As shown in table (3) and Figure (3), the dominate function of idioms in the novel is ideational Function (17 appearance; 68%), then interpersonal function (8 occurrence; 32%), and relation function are rarely used in the novel.

**Table (4) Frequency and Percentage of Semantic Classification in the Novel**

Semantic Classification	No.	Percentage
Compositional	1	4%
Conventional	15	60%
Transparency	9	36%
Total	25	100%



**Figure (4) A histogrammic Representation of Semantic Classification in the Novel**

As it is revealed in the above figure and table (4), the conventional idioms are the most utilized by the author as it occurred 60%, transparency comes after conventional idioms it appeared 36%, finally, compositional idioms occurred frequently in 4% in the novel.

## 7. Conclusion

Idioms are fascinating phrases, and they are interesting to study. They have figurative meaning. The study showed that “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer” is filled with idioms, colloquial speech, and specific dialect. Based on the analysis provided by the researchers,

the most used idioms are semi-idioms, which involve literal and figurative meaning at the same time. The ideational function is the most occurring in the novel, and along with that, conventional idioms are used heavily. Identifying the meaning of idioms is really challenging. They play a significant role in enhancing language and style, whether in written or spoken language. Therefore, studying idioms from a semantic point of view improves the understanding of idiomatic expression and their meaning beyond the literal. The study also showed that idioms have a function, and it uncovered the relationship between them and language. It also exposed their use in literary work. It is valuable to study these special expressions from a semantic and analytical perspective. At the end, the study demonstrated that idioms have functions, types, and features, and they are utilized in Mark Twain's works.

### CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

There are no conflicts of interest

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